

## Accused

1612 Pendle witch hunts

The sound of gnarled skeletal finger tapping against the wood of the pulpit echoed throughout the vaulted room. He scowled at his captivated audience, eyes cold and merciless showing no remorse for those whom he would purge from this earth. The stuffy air of the old church suffocated our senses, as we waited in anticipation for our fate to be sealed. For once those damning words were spoken, there was no escaping their grasp.

Daily life was repetitive; I would wake and prepare breakfast for my father before he set out for the farm. In his absence, I was left to fulfil the duties of a housewife. The duties once carried out by my mother who had passed, three years this autumn, leaving me to look after my bitter father. I often found myself being scolded for voicing my opinion on matters which did not concern me. Even in the village I had quite the reputation for being too headstrong. Most girls my age were preparing to marry and settle down, where they would most likely remain tethered to their wifely duties until the day they died. I had decided that this future did not hold appeal for me.

He arrived, a powerful presence claiming to be a priest, a holy man, looking to please the Lord Almighty out of the “goodness” of his heart. But I was no fool! The bulging sack of gold strapped to his waist told a different story, a thousand words about the ‘honourable’ donations he had received from his work. Draped from head to toe in grand robes, a great contrast to our monochromatic palette to which we had all become accustomed. From the summit of the hill his solitary figure would often watch the dawn rise, a thin moustache curled at the edges of his lips like whiskers as he inhaled the morning air.

Our peaceful village lay in the valley near Pendle Hill, small cottages lined up like uniformed soldiers, surrounded by unyielding land which desperate men fought over daily, as land meant power. The River Ribble meandered through our village and was often lined along the shallows with women washing clothes and children escaping their work to take a cooling dip. The church lay at the very centre of our village, a constant reminder that we could never escape God’s damning judgement. A cloud of dry dust blew across the dirt road like a barren desert, uprooting the earthy smells which lay beneath.

‘I am here on behalf of the all mighty Lord above, to eradicate the witches from this village as they plague our world with their very existence. ’ His bold words sent shockwaves through my entire body. Although rumours of witches were common, we had all ignorantly convinced ourselves, that such a thing would never happen here. Even the elders and clergyman had previously sneered at the very idea. Others feared the topic may bring unwanted attention from neighbouring villages and self-proclaimed trophy hunters, but no matter the source it was agreed that witches meant trouble.

It was not long before fear of this unknown force swept through the village like a tsunami, engulfing everything in its path. It turned neighbours against neighbours, husbands against wives, friends into foes: nobody could be trusted. Everyone kept a close eye out for anyone who may disappear into the woods late at night to cast a spell upon those they held a grudge.

After six days of sheer panic, a meeting was called for the head members of each family. Somehow I had managed to convince my father to bring me along. It was the first time I would have the opportunity to gather information on the priest’s motives and whom he may accuse.

The room was dark and claustrophobic. There was a feeling of unease as all members waited in anticipation for what this 'Man of God' would profess. As I looked around, I could see the faces of villagers who had helped raise me, to look at each other with suspicion and fear. This priest had brought about change and like a plague, these feelings had taken root and were spreading like yersinia pestis at a devastating rate. He spoke of witchcraft, of our neighbours plotting against us, taking examples of illness and misfortune to weave the toxic web of suspicion as the suggestion was strategically placed in the minds of those affected. Even claiming the unexplained death of a child a result of healing herbs used by the midwife who now was deemed to be a creature of the night. A soul taker.

I could not stay silent as I listened in horror to the evil accusations spew forth from this Man of God against my neighbours, my friends- men and women who had worked hard to make a living and to raise a family in a village that was our home, our little piece of heaven. I could not control the anger growing inside of me, boiling up dangerously close to the edge. The anger had a voice and I had lost control. I turned to face my friends and neighbours and begged them to see sense, to see that this Priest was poison. My father grabbed my arm and dragged me from the room but as I glanced over my shoulder a cold shudder ran down my spine. From the pulpit, cold grey eyes captured my stare and a cruel smile played on his lips.

It felt as though an eternity had passed as we sat in the small church the following Sunday, listening to the priest's verses, the congregation entranced like a cobra moving to the sound of our charmer's flute. My mouth has grown dry and my tongue thick from the amount of time that I had gone without water. I both hoped and feared that his ramble would soon draw to its conclusion. He paused and inhaled as if a mighty force had possessed his body as he proclaimed.

"This woman who sits among you, pretending to be just like the rest of you is indeed a witch."

I looked up in horror to see his mangled hand reaching out towards me.